

LONG LAST DENIAL IS NOT HEALTHY

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Denial is a normal reaction when we are told something so horrible to face. Certainly we reacted with denial when we learned of our child's death. Denial is not only a universal reaction to a horror, but it is a way of not facing the horror all at once. Fortunately denial protects us from a sudden crushing blow and because of denial we can allow the truth to filter into our awareness more slowly. Denial is normal, healthy and protective.

But denial that lasts too long is not healthy. We must face the reality that our child is dead before we can begin to grieve. Reality is not always good or even acceptable. Many times it is terribly, terribly painful. Our child's death is the ultimate painful reality, but you must face it if you are to grieve successfully.

Our society uses euphemisms for anything unpleasant. We say "up-chuck" instead of "vomit." We say going to the "bathroom" rather than "to the toilet." We say "terminated" instead of "fired." Even nurses and doctors say, "the patient has expired" instead of "died." Dr. Earl Grollman, author of *Living When a Loved One has Died*, says the new "four letter word is DEAD. The euphemisms for "dead" are many, we say "passes on," "left us," "went to his reward," "asleep in Jesus," and on and on. Our society uses these phrases to soften the real truth, but as bereaved parents we cannot do this. I heard one father say, "I cannot use the word dead, it sounds so final." Well, death is final and no matter how we flower it up, our child is still dead.

There are other ways to avoid the reality that our child is dead. One mother pretends to herself that her daughter is still away at school. She says it makes it easier for her. She was still doing this eight months after her nineteen year old daughter was killed in an auto accident on the way home from college. As long as this mother refuses to let herself KNOW that her daughter is dead she cannot begin to grieve. She is prolonging the inevitable.

Another mother whose child has been dead for six months buys clothes or toys for her. She says, "Maybe someday I'll have another child and she'll like them." She is buying them for her dead daughter because she will not let herself know at a deep level that her daughter is dead.

Keeping a child's room exactly as it was for an overlong time, or refusing to put away our child's belongings is another form of denial. In the early months we have neither the energy nor the wish to do something with the room or belongings and we should not let ourselves be rushed into doing this, but to keep everything the same way for too many months is believing deep down, that our child is coming home.

It is important to know, at a gut level, that our child is dead. It takes time, sometimes a number of months, before we are able to face the fact, but eventually we must. The use of euphemisms or pretending or doing nothing with our child's possessions, keeps us from getting "into" our grief. It is hard to face the reality that our child is dead, but to continue to feed our unconscious wish that he/she is still alive, is to put off our healing.